ACT II: ZEUS SWALLOWS METIS WHOLE

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/38798466.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Underage
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Underage Drinking, Consensual Underage Sex, Young Will Graham, Alternate Universe - Boarding School, Canon-Typical Violence, Minor Character Death
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Italy, 1993
Stats:	Published: 2022-05-05 Completed: 2022-05-19 Words: 17,730 Chapters: 10/10

ACT II: ZEUS SWALLOWS METIS WHOLE

by skeletontwins

Summary

Despite their estrangement, high school senior Will Graham and twenty-something Hannibal Lecter are forced to team up to catch a killer haunting the streets of Tuscany.

Notes

This story is the second part of a three-part series and I recommend you read the first part (Act I: Persephone Descends Unto the Underworld) before reading this part. That being said, it's not illegal in New York, where this Will is from, nor Italy, where this fic takes place, but I've tagged this underage because Will is 17 and Hannibal is in his early 20s, which is icky. This isn't meant to explore a healthy, normal relationship and I want people to be able to filter this story out to their needs. Hope you enjoy the continuation of this story!

CHAPTER I

Chapter Notes

> Hi! I'm back so soon because I didn't want to leave people hanging with that Act I ending. Full disclosure: updates will not usually be this regular (we're reaching exam season, sadly). That being said, this fic is definitely my reprieve from all the bullshit so I will be working on it as much as possible during my free time. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The search party, which Will isn't welcome to join, does not find Gio.

Instead, it is the headmaster, who was allegedly in the school's chapel to pray about the situation, who finds her. Dead. Mutilated. Will doesn't know how exactly; no one does. Just that it was so gruesome, the headmaster was sick afterwards. So gruesome, there were talks of sending all the students home, shutting down the school, ending St. Gabriel altogether. So gruesome, even, that the local priest was called to cleanse the chapel of demonic energy once the scene was cleared. All this is told by word of mouth, which travels through the student body like a disease. Will breaks off his friendship with Gio's group of friends and acquaintances only after hearing this. He wants to know. He doesn't want to know. It doesn't matter. Once he learns he can't unlearn, and all he can picture is Gio's body, without her bright, kind eyes, without her smile, without her limbs.

This is what drives Will to contact Dora. He appears in the school administrative office late one evening, sleepless and with only one request. *Let me see her,* is on the tip of his tongue when she says, sounding almost regretful, "There are no calls for you." Her bluntness, such a stark reflection of Will's own, surprises him. "Or packages," she adds. He almost smiles, but of course, does not.

"I know," Will says.

They're alone together in the office, as they were all those times before, and Dora looks around, checking all the doors. Will watches this and manages to muster up some curiosity, though it has been nearly impossible to experience or express any feeling since Gio's… and… Since it all happened the way it did. Will watches Dora with a fair amount of interest, as she checks the exits, then shuffles her papers, putting them away. "It was me who told the headmaster to ask about you and Dottore Lecter," she says, all in a rush. "I…" She starts, then trails off. "I was worried… It doesn't matter," she says finally. "I wanted to say that—that I'm very sorry." Will notices how thick her accent is and, in a strange, displaced moment, that his own American accent must be unbearable to listen to, and that must be why they all speak in English to him. "I am very sorry if I caused anything bad to happen. I hope you can accept my apology and if there's anything I can do to make it up to you…" she leaves it at that; an offering.

Will looks around the room. There are plaques hanging, boasting the school's awards and achievements. There are photos of each graduating class, since 1958. There is evidence of lifetimes lived, and Will thinks that perhaps it would not be a bad idea to shut down the school. Perhaps the world should stop on its axis, after something so terrible has happened to it, after such a loss. "It's okay," Will says, even though none of it is okay, so obviously not okay that it isn't worth mentioning. "I'm not mad. It wasn't because of you, anyways." *It was because of me,* Will thinks, though the whole affair with Hannibal seems so unbelievably childish and petty now, in retrospect. Not that he wants to contact Hannibal. The very thought of it makes him anxious. But that's not why he's here today. "There is something you could do for me— not to pay me back, just a favor."

Dora looks nearly relieved. "Anything," she answers easily. "What is it?"

Dora looks more hesitant when actually handing him the files, all sorted neatly in manilla envelopes. Will can nearly hear her thoughts— she's torn between '*This is illegal,*' and '*Are you sure you want to see this?*' Will wants to comfort her, or— would want to, if he had that kind of capacity to feel anymore. He might say, '*It's illegal, but it's not wrong. There is a gap in the world between law and morality, and then a gap between morality and reality.'* Then perhaps Will would say, '*I'm sure I want to see this. I won't blame you if I regret looking. Trust me, trust me, trust me.*' Will says nothing, just forces a smile that feels out of place and takes the folders from her hands. "Don't look at them here," she says and Will almost tells her that it's more dangerous to take the files to a second location, but then realizes she probably doesn't want to see anything by mistake.

So Will takes them to the chapel.

It's unlocked, though there's some tape up that Will steps over. He guesses the fear of demons or ghosts or whatever it is that's supposed to live in this chapel now is enough, on its own, to keep nosy students at bay. But not Will. He crosses the lines of police tape into the center of the chapel, where there are no blood stains, no gore, no evidence of the crime committed but still, Will knows what happened here. He removes the thick, glossy photographs from the envelopes slowly, not afraid to see them but somehow sickly anticipating the images. They can't be worse than what Will has in his head, can they?

Will glances down at the photos, then looks up and *sees* Gio there, before him, posed as she is in the pictures. Will sees it all in vivid, horrific detail: Gio in an ancient, hand-made bridal gown, the train moth-eaten and trailing behind her, her hands bound together by twine, with a bouquet of red roses to mean love, violets to mean faith, devotion, lilacs for innocence. Will approaches the body, his hands suddenly empty, only him and Gio, and sees that her mouth is filled with the roses. There's the obvious: a bride missing her groom, a body missing its liver, a meticulous crime scene. Will sees the C.O.D.: a clean slit to the throat, likely that Gio knew her killer or at least trusted him. But Will also sees what the killer saw; not a body, but a poem. *Choked by love. A birdcage for a chest and a flower garden for a tongue,* Will thinks, examining the body, getting closer and closer. *You had all you wanted and still— it was not enough.*

“Aye!”

Will whips around, the folders suddenly in his hands again, Gio suddenly gone, the golden light of the moment evaporated, the cool blues of reality setting in. *Your name is Will Graham*. *You are—* but no. That brings back too many memories. Of Hannibal. Worse, of Gio. So Will takes a deep breath in instead, holds a hand up to block out some of the flashlight beam being shone in his eyes, and lets the breath out. “Sorry I just— *Era una mia amica*.”

The— presumably poliziotto, lowers the flashlight slightly and Will can make out his silhouette against the twilight outside. “*Non ti è permesso entrare qui*,” the poliziotto says firmly, his voice stern but not intimidating. The man is large, and Will adjusts his glasses against the glare of the flashlight and is able to make out some of the details of the poliziotto’s face. He has a ratty mustache growing above his upper lip and beady eyes. Will’s not afraid but still, when the poliziotto beckons Will towards him and Will, hands raised in the air instinctively, still holding the envelopes with the photographs, as though he’s under arrest, follows. Will wants the path of least resistance; he is not the person he once was.

As they walk the poliziotto walks Will to the school administration office, he asks who gave him the case files. Will waits a beat too long before answering. “*Li ho rubati,*” he lies, finally, that he stole them himself. He nearly chokes on it. This, at least, is a lie for himself, to protect Dora. That much, he can bear. Everything else… feels like too much. *This is the only life I have,* Will supposes. *This is it.*

Will is put on probation for stealing the case file and breaking into a crime scene, and can’t even muster up some gratitude that he hasn’t been expelled or arrested. Dora, apparently, vouched for him and lost her job over it. Will learns, from the headmaster, that Dora is a fellow scholarship student, at St. Gabriel through a work-study program, and may be forced to relocate to a new school. If Will’s heart weren’t already broken, it'd break for her too. But there’s no room left in his life for empathy, or kindness, or selflessness. Will is a husk of a person, with nothing left. There is nothing left.

Chapter End Notes

Era una mia amica: She was a friend of mine
Non ti è permesso entrare qui: You're not allowed in here

CHAPTER II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Days pass in a blur. Whether Will eats or starves, sleeps or stays up all hours of the day and night, attends classes or holes up in his dorm, he does not know. He thinks he is interviewed by the polizia about Gio, but he can't be sure. All he knows is that he cannot cry.

Will moves through the halls of St. Gabriel like a ghost, stops in front of the room his Biology class takes place in. Does he have Biology today? He doesn't know. He steps inside the room and it's empty. He takes a seat on a stool at the front row of lab tables, folds his arms on the surface of the table, and rests his head on his arms. He's facing the large, floor-to-ceiling windows on the other side of the room and he watches as kids outside play football, kicking the ball across the rolling green. Will watches them and wishes he could be someone else.

The longer he watches, the more he swears he can make out a figure in the foggy distance. As the figure gets closer, Will sees that it's a woman.

It's Gio.

Will watches her approach though he knows she's not there. But she gets closer and closer, looking so real, so beautiful. Will wants to cry, but doesn't, still. Will wants to go to her but still, knows she's not there. "You're not real," Will whispers. Gio, on the other side of the glass, her hand pressed against it now, says nothing. She does not smile at him, though Will wishes she would. He misses her smile more than anything. He'd give *anything* to see it again. "You're not real," Will repeats, still a whisper. But God, he wants her to be. He misses her with a desperation and ferocity he did not think was possible. Will closes his eyes and when he opens them again, Gio's gone.

Will wakes up in the middle of the night, blinks his eyes blearily, and sees the back of Gio's blonde head. She's standing on the other side of his dorm, facing away from him, looking at the corkboard. When she turns around, as Will sits up, her mouth is filled with roses.

It goes on like that for some time; Will seeing Gio, sometimes living, sometimes dead. Living is probably worse.

Once, Will thinks he sees someone speaking to her, but then he realizes it's not Gio; it's her mother.

Only 20 or so years older than Gio and just as beautiful, the woman is dressed well, standing tall, but crying. The headmaster pats her arm awkwardly, and one of the other school administrators nods sympathetically. Will watches, standing stock-still, the hallway foot traffic weaving around him, and he wants to say something to her. He wants to approach her, apologize, ask her about Gio, *not* ask her about Gio, *something* , Jesus. Will is shaken by the fact that, for a moment, he really thought it was a living Gio. He is shaken by the fact that, up until that moment, he had selfishly not considered Gio's family. She spoke of them sometimes, mostly when they were fighting, when her brother started drinking again, when her little sister went through her 'hating-everything' phase, but sometimes when things were good. However she talked about them, it was clear they all loved each other very, very much. Will can't imagine how they feel now. He hopes they take comfort in having each other, but he knows the statistics on divorce after the death of a child. He doesn't know what to do with this; all this *himself* he's left with after Gio's gone.

Eventually, the headmaster leads Gio's mother away from the crowded hall and towards his office and Will is left standing there in the hallway for no reason, with no one to lead him to a private room, with no tears to cry, with nothing. Nothing but himself. He looks down. Nothing but his hands. He looks back up at the emptying hallway. Nothing but himself.

The only thing which makes Will aware of his birthday passing is the thick, ornate-looking envelope he receives in the mail, addressed to him in a neat, dancing script. Will puts the letter in a shoebox without looking at it, sticks the box under his bed. He can't bear to read whatever's written inside, can't even bring himself to think about who sent it to him. Will doesn't even want to think of his *name.*

Will sits on his bed and looks out the window at his tree. His little, gnarled tree, nestled in its tiny patch of grass, absorbing the sun. Where he met Gio. He looks and can't help but remember the way she bounded up to him, so excited she fell down, so excited to see him. Will thinks the only other person who ever liked him that much was… well. He knows who it was.

Will is eighteen years old today.

Long after the chapel has been combed over by the polizia, long after nothing has been found except for what the killer wanted the polizia to find, once it's open to the public again, Will visits. It's late, but the chapel remains open all hours of the day and night, for students to pray whenever they need to, Will guesses. Luckily, no one is there as Will opens the door slowly and steps softly, almost silent, not wanting to draw any attention to himself. He's not sure why he's here. Maybe just to prove he can bear it.

He sits at a pew towards the front, and looks up at the crucifix hanging above the altar, which is decorated with candles. He looks up at the mangled Jesus on the cross and remembers his prayer— the only time he's prayed in his adult life, and what it was for. He considers praying again now, but what for? For Gio to return? For Gio to leave?

Just then, when Will looks down from his fixed point on the cross, Gio appears. This time, she speaks. "Hi, Will," she says and her voice is so beautiful, so melodic, her accent lilting and her pitch perfect, Will wonders why he never noticed how beautiful her voice was before now. Will regrets himself, not for the first time.

Will feels his throat become scratchy and a lump form but still, he does not cry. Instead, he looks at her with a sorrowful smile and says, "Hi." He says, "It's good to see you."

She grins at him. "Missed me much?" she asks playfully and Will wants to fall at her feet, but he doesn't. He stays seated in his pew and eventually, she joins him. He chuckles.

"Yeah," he says. "I miss you."

Will's twisted in the pew to look at Gio, but Gio's facing ahead, looking up at the crucifix perhaps. After a long pause, she speaks again, "You miss *him,* too." Will quickly looks away, at the stained glass windows on his right side, which is barely visible in the candlelight. Gio pokes his side and Will swears he can feel it. "It's ridiculous," she says. "You won't even say his name, like he's a curse or something. Ridiculous." Will shakes his head. He looks back at Gio. She smiles a small, golden smile. "It's okay to love someone who hurts you— you can't help it, Will. But more importantly," she tips her head towards Will with a conspiratorial tilt, "it's okay to forgive yourself for hurting you."

"Is that what happened?" Will asks and hates himself for sounding more damaged than furious.

Gio looks at him and Will realizes he can't make out her eyes exactly. But he remembers them as a perfect ocean-blue. Still, he wishes he could see her eyes. "You know what happened," she says. Will nods. He supposes he does. "Come on," Gio says a little suddenly, and she stands. Will looks up at her and she holds a hand out for him to take. "I'll walk you to your room." Will doesn't take her hand, but he follows her back to his dorm.

Will falls asleep that night thinking of the conversation with Gio, and wakes up in the morning to a knock on his door.

He opens it in his pajamas, which consist of a ratty t-shirt from a bait and tackle store and a pair of loose boxers, to see a very old administrator, with powder-white hair and knobby, wrinkled fingers. She raises a hand in greeting, politely not mentioning Will's state of undress, or maybe not noticing at all. "*Ciao, giovanotto*," she says, her voice thick with rasp. "I am here to tell you that your, ah… *prova* is finished." Will nods his head. "You are very good," she adds with a smile and Will nods again, though he does not agree.

“Thank you,” he says, feeling suddenly… something. More than he’s felt in the weeks since Gio’s death. He fixates on the feeling, the words the administrator's speaking sounding far away. *How do I feel?* Will wonders. *What is this?*

“You are welcome to spend the rest of the year here, at St. Gabriel,” she says finally, then nods her head once, politely, and shuffles away.

Will watches her go as he tries to pin down the inexplicable feeling in his gut. He retreats further into his room and shuts the door behind him. He goes to the full length mirror next to his closet and looks at himself for a moment. His clothes are wrinkled, crumpled, slept in. There’s dark, purplish bruising under his eyes from lack of sleep, which makes him look gaunt and frightening. Something about Will’s eyes is like a startled animal, untrusting and wounded, skittish. Will looks in the mirror, and sees something unrecognizable.

The feeling is unrecognizable as well. *Who are you now?* Will asks his reflection. *What are you thinking?*

He remembers what Gio said to him last night. *You know what happened.*

He remembers the last thing he thought she would say to him. *Trust yourself.*

Will knows what he’s thinking, really. He can’t deny it. It’s in his very nature; justice, compassion, curiosity. There’s only one thing he can possibly do. He’s going to catch Gio’s killer.

Chapter End Notes

Ciao, giovanotto: Hello, young man.
Prova: Probation

CHAPTER III

Chapter Notes

Sorry these updates have been short! I promise things are about to pick up.

"No," the poliziotto tells him firmly. He's a Brit and, based on his accent, from the North. Will's struggling to take him seriously. Will shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and looks around the station. He tries to think of how he's going to get his hands on the information he needs without breaking any more laws, if asking isn't working. *Asking nicely, perhaps*? Will's brain offers.

"Please?"

The poliziotto chuckles at Will breathily. Will frowns. "Look," the poliziotto says clearly, "you're a little delinquent, like. You're lucky I don't arrest you right now, for," the poliziotto begins counting off items with his thick, red fingers and Will wants to bite them off his hand, one by one, "tampering with evidence, obstructing the justice, getting on my last nerve. You better call the embassy, if you're going to stick around here, like." Will wants to spit on this poliziotto, but instead he just looks down at his muddied shoes, takes a deep breath in, looks back up, and lets the breath out.

"Gioconda was my best friend," Will insists, making a token effort at keeping his voice measured. "I'm just looking for some closure." He does manage to keep his voice mellow but still, feels anger bubbling up within him.

When the poliziotto speaks, he enunciates each word carefully. "Look. Somewhere. Else," he says, spraying Will with saliva on the 's' sounds. Will wipes at his face and something in his expression makes the poliziotto laugh out loud, *loudly*. Will scowls some more, though that only makes the poliziotto laugh harder.

Will turns on his heel and storms out of the police station, shouldering through the front doors harshly, nearly bowling over an incoming old woman. Really, Will's not sure why he bothered in the first place. He knew they could do nothing for him. As a student, a foreigner, and an autistic person, he's not getting in anywhere without either credentials, charm, or money.

Furious and alone, Will boards a bus to the stop near St. Gabriel. As he stands, holding the handgrip, it occurs to him who he knows with credentials, charm, and money. *I can't,* Will insists internally, shutting that line of thinking down immediately. Will wishes he had headphones, something, anything to drown out his mind. Will looks out the window, at the other passengers, his own feet, anywhere to have something to do. He switches hands holding

the handgrip again and again, just to move. Finally, the bus comes to a squealing halt in front of a stop near a liquor store and Will, despite himself, deboards.

They don't even ask for his I.D., though Will knows he has a young face.

He buys a bottle of cheap liquor, the brand his father used to buy— probably still buys, and tucks it into the inner pocket of his too-thin-for-the-weather jacket, which is ratty and riddled with holes thankfully too small for the bottle to fall through. Will leaves the liquor store huffing, stomping, still angry with the polizia, angry with himself for even considering calling You-Know-Who as a resource (Will can hear Gio in his head, making fun of Will for thinking of *him* that way), angry with the world. For all of it. Everything.

Will has to wait on the next bus to St. Gabriel, meaning he gets there late at night, long past curfew. He swears under his breath. Now that he's resolved to stay in Italy for the remainder of the year, he is determined to take the steps necessary to maintain his scholarship, including attending classes just often enough to prevent himself from being expelled. He sneaks carefully through the front entrance of the school, past the front office, all the way to the boys' dormitory. He removes his shoes once inside the first door, and walks up the stairs with silent, socked feet, cradling the bottle within the breast pocket of his jacket. He opens the door to his room slowly, cringing as it creaks. Once he's inside the room and the door is shut behind him, he lets out a sigh of relief, and removes the bottle from inside his ratty jacket and twists the cap, breaking the seal.

He starts with a good, long gulp from the bottle, holding it by the neck and breathing through his nose. The taste is putrid, but nothing Will hasn't tried before.

Will went through a phase, from ages 13 to 15, where all he did was drink and complete homework assignments, both activities lonely pursuits, constantly doing just well enough to maintain his status of 'savant', but not any better than that. He drank all day and night, sneaking sips from his father's liquor cabinet, topping off vodka bottles with water. He would stumble into his advanced high-school-level classes, stumble through them, and then stumble back home at the end of the day. He was an unmitigated mess, with an IQ of 190. Looking back the whole phenomenon seems childish and vaguely unsettling, but still, Will has no qualms with returning to his roots. He takes another long pull from the bottle.

He opts to lay back on his bed, bottle in hand, shoes kicked off and shirt untucked and, does, indeed, get fantastically drunk.

In the early hours of the morning, just as the sun begins to peek out from behind the horizon and Will begins to doze off, Gio appears. Will nearly throws the almost-empty bottle at her in his surprise and, admittedly, anguish. He's so sick of living with her memory. He's drinking in an effort to forget— doesn't she see that?

“Ugh,” he says, rolling over to face the wall. “Go away,” he pleads.

Will hears the sound of Gio’s approaching footsteps and turns slightly, trying to see out of the corner of his eye. She’s sitting at the foot of his bed and where the mattress should dip a little to account for her slight weight, it does not.

“You’re not even really here,” Will complains, turning over once again.

Gio says nothing to this and it’s almost an offended silence.

“I can’t decide,” Will huffs, not caring if he hurts her imaginary feelings, or at least that’s what he’s telling himself. He turns over to lay on his back and stare at the ceiling, still avoiding looking at Gio, “if you’re a ghost or just a hallucination.” He folds his hands together and rests them on his stomach. “Causes of hallucinations,” Will starts, now closing his eyes, “include mental illness, epilepsy, and sometimes brain tumors or inflammation.” Will frowns with his eyes closed, at nothing, at everything, thinking about the possibility of mental illness; crazy on top of all the rest of it. “Causes of ghosts include…” Will throws an arm over his closed eyes. “Bullshit!” He giggles. “I ain’t afraid of no ghosts,” he says through laughter.

When Gio speaks, her voice is as magnificent as always. “Are you finished?” she asks.

“Finished?”

Gio lays beside him, crowding him against the wall on the tiny bed, and Will removes his arm and opens his eyes to look at her. He turns slightly, to face her. “Finished with your drunken rant?” she clarifies, making it sound somehow gentle. Gio begins to slowly pet the length of Will’s arm, soothing him the way you would soothe a child. “Everything will be okay,” she says softly, and Will can almost feel her touch. Her voice is sweet and clear, mellow and tender, and Will does his best to listen to what she’s saying, though it’s difficult to focus. “But you have to stop pushing people away. You are setting yourself on fire. To do what you want to do… you need his help.” Will blinks slowly. “You need Hannibal,” Gio says.

Hearing his name is so jarring, Will begins to tremor slightly. He hasn’t touched the name—which is as unique and beautiful as Hannibal himself, even within his own mind, since seeing Gio’s body for the first time. Even he doesn't know what links the two events in his head, other than the coincidental timing. The difficult part is, Will believes Gio. He *wants* to believe Gio. “You’re just me,” Will says, finishing the thought out loud. “You’re literally only capable of telling me what I want to hear.”

“Sometimes what you want to hear and what you need to hear…” Gio says, her tone something sympathetic, “is the same thing.”

Will closes his eyes again, tries his very best to *feel* Gio pressed against him, and still fails at this. He falls asleep like that, with the ghost of her by his side, his only comfort, his perfectly preserved memorial, still not enough.

The next morning, hungover and aching, Will wakes up. He looks around the empty dorm room, sparsely furnished with nothing but a large cork board adorning the wall, and dust motes floating in the air, and finally begins to cry.

He cries all day.

At night, he unearths the little silver cell phone from its velvety box. The moment feels like a dream, or something that's happening to someone else, not Will himself. *I shouldn't be doing this,* Will tells himself as flips open the little phone. *I shouldn't do this.* Hannibal's phone number is the only number on the speed dial. Hannibal picks up on the third ring.

CHAPTER IV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will waits in the bitter, gray drizzle in the St. Gabriel staff parking lot for Hannibal to pick him up. He tries not to think about what he's doing. In his ratty jacket which he brought from America, he's very cold. He focuses on that. He focuses on the slant of the light rain and the sound of it hitting the pavement. He shoves his hands in his hole-ridden pockets and tries to pretend he's not waiting for Hannibal to arrive, the way he has so many times before. Will ignores the fact that it's so similar to months past and yet, completely changed. Will also purposefully does not think about Hannibal's tone when Will called— his well contained excitement, barely noticeable, ever so subtle and yet, there. Certainly, there. Will shakes his head. He's not thinking of that.

The Benz appears from around the bend and pulls up to where Will is standing on the curb outside the school. The car slows to a stop and the windows are too tinted to see inside but already Will is picturing Hannibal's perfect face. Hannibal appears from the other side of the car, presumably to open the door for Will, and the first thing that pops into Will's head is: *You've gotten a haircut.* Hannibal's hair is in it's familiar, close-cropped style, though slightly shorter than it was the last time Will and he saw each other.

That, somehow, ignites an anger in Will in a way nothing else has, despite the waves of anger and disappointment and hurt Will has been drowning in. The idea of Hannibal, who knows what happened, *must* know, scheduling an appointment, sitting down in a barber's chair, asking for a trim, makes Will seethe with fury. Will is not a violent person, and doesn't become one in fits of anger, but this is the closest he's come to wanting to hit someone. Instead, Will lets Hannibal open the door for him and climbs into the car. His hands are balled into fists, his short nails biting into his clammy palms. "How have you been?" Will grits out, his teeth nearly grinding.

Hannibal's in the car shortly after Will, turning the keys in the ignition and saying, "Well." Will looks out the window, not wanting to see Hannibal and his ridiculous, perfect, recently-cut hair. "I am planning a dinner party," Hannibal adds as though it's an afterthought, though Will knows his speech to be as calculated as ever. Hannibal, surprising Will, returns the question. "And you, Will?" he asks. Will feels as though the rose-colored lens through which he saw Hannibal is now shattered, and he views the question as clumsy and apathetic. Hannibal should know how Will's doing.

"My best friend is dead," Will says, his voice so bitter he swears he can taste it, like bile, coming out of his mouth. The truth is so ugly, so big, Will almost feels a power in saying it— as though he's reclaiming something. Though, there's a deep sadness Will can't contend with, can't ignore, which threatens to overpower the righteous anger he feels. "My only friend," Will adds, in what he will never admit is a dig at Hannibal. *In a way,* Will thinks, in his own defense, *maybe that's true. Maybe Hannibal and I were never friends at all.*

Will looks at Hannibal to see him making a strange expression, one Will has never seen before and can't categorize or identify. The expression morphs into one of recognizable, guarded sympathy, the kind of face a therapist might put on for a client, though Hannibal keeps his eyes on the road. "American Indians of Northern Californian tribes set forests ablaze long before their colonizers would adopt the practices of the 'controlled burn'." Will looks at Hannibal's hands on the wheel. They flex slightly. Will finds within himself, still, even now, a desire to *touch*. Hannibal continues, "Humans have always understood loss to be a part of growth." Hannibal takes the familiar turn which delineates Florence from the town of Montaione. Will feels strange, knowing what awaits them in Florence. The words Hannibal's speaking sound empty to Will's ears though a part of him is, admittedly, grateful to be spoken to by a living person. It's been so long. And, still, Will wants Hannibal. He hates himself for it, but he does. He wants him how he's always wanted Hannibal, perhaps even more now, with a deeper and more meaningful intensity. Even so, Will remains guarded. He's here with his benefactor, to solve a mystery. *That's* all *I'm here for,* Will thinks to himself. Hannibal says, "Your forest is on fire." He says, "You will emerge from the flames."

They arrive at the morgue and, as Will requested over the phone, Hannibal's paid the technician off for some time with Gio's body. Will's not sure how he will fare in this environment but he's willing to do whatever it takes to catch Gio's killer. He looks at the tiled floor as Hannibal exchanges words with the tehnician. He's already seen Gio's body, in photos, in visions, but this is real. All too real. Still, Will's sure he can stomach it— he has to. He clenches his fists inside the pockets of his jacket and scuffs his shoe against the tiled floor. "Will," Hannibal says quietly, catching Will's attention. Will looks up and Hannibal's across the room, at the door which leads to the rest of the morgue, to the part of the building where the actual bodies are kept, and Hannibal's beckoning Will over. Will steels himself, and crosses the room, into the belly of the beast.

They look over Gio's body, which is marred by the mutilation from the killer and the Y-incision from the autopsy. The autopsy, which found nothing the police couldn't glean from the scene, according to the forensics technician. Still, she is beautiful. Though looking at her face with all the life drained away feels wrong, deeply wrong. Her eyes are open, which Will supposes he expected on some level but it still surprises him. *They should be closed,* Will thinks, though they really shouldn't. *She's dead. Her eyes should be closed.*

"Cause of death?" Hannibal prompts.

Will blinks and sees just the body. Not Gio. Just another dead body.

White female, no tattoos, no scars. Minor abrasions on the wrists, likely from the twine-restraints. Large incision running from the length of the throat to the lower abdomen. Liver, kidneys, heart, were all missing. Large horizontal incision running the width of the throat— based on the angle at which the blade entered the flesh, this was done from in front of the victim; she saw his face. It was a straight-edge blade, likely a scalpel. Tox report shows no

signs of drug or alcohol use. Will closes his eyes, going over details of the case within his mind. “The slit throat,” Will says, answering Hannibal’s question. “She knew her killer— at least well enough to get close to him. He cut her from the front.” Will opens his eyes again, sees the body for who it is: Gio. It’s Gio.

“What else? Something is bothering you,” Hannibal asserts.

Will frowns. Gio. She’s so beautiful. She almost looks like she’s sleeping but then, she doesn’t at all. “It’s— The killer… He…” Will is almost unable to tear his gaze off Gio, but eventually he swallows, looks back up at Hannibal, who is watching him with an indescribable intensity. “He had the stomach to take her organs, but he had to kill her first.”

Hannibal cocks his head uncannily. “Is that so strange?” he asks. “Many serial killers never develop the nerve required to mutilate a living person.”

Will squints. “How do you know it’s a serial killer?”

Hannibal’s face goes blank for a moment. He looks down at Gio. He looks back up at Will. “This is the work of an experienced killer, not the fumblings of a fledgling. The sureness of the incisions. The lack of experimentation. The indistinct motive. The killer—”

“This wasn’t psycho-sexual,” Will says quickly, cutting Hannibal off.

“Then what was it?”

Will turns suddenly, looking at the wall of the morgue. “I don’t know,” he says, his face feeling itchy and hot once again. He feels the urge to flap his hands, but doesn’t. “I don’t know,” he repeats. “Something else— this unsub is something that hasn’t— *shouldn’t* exist.” Will studies the wall, tries to breath in and out.

“Perhaps the killer is simply impotent.”

Will’s becoming frustrated. “He’s *not*,” Will insists, knowing it, not knowing how he knows it.

“Why did he kill her?” Hannibal asks and it’s the final straw. Will storms out.

Hannibal is close behind Will, and quickly joins him in sitting on the curb outside the morgue, though it must be ruining the seat of his expensive pants. They sit in silence for a while.

Will thinks of the autopsy he watched in Biology class, only a few months ago. A lifetime ago. He thinks of Gio sitting in front of him, guessing suicide.

“I wonder,” Will says after a long moment of unbroken quiet between them, “if there’s a single point on our string of fate where it all frayed apart.” Perhaps the moment he agreed to go to Italy. Perhaps the moment he met Hannibal. Perhaps the first kiss. Perhaps this was all

determined, inevitable, the only possibility. *Maybe,* Will thinks, *there isn't a single thing I could've done to prevent any of this. Maybe it's better that way.*

Hannibal is silent still, looking somewhere in the middle distance, and Will watches him. Finally, he speaks, his voice a shade more sincere than it was in the car on the way to the morgue. "My aunt," he says and Will nearly gets chills, "taught me the practice of *kintsugi*—meaning 'golden repair'. It is the practice of mending broken pottery with a golden lacquer." Will and Hannibal sit together for another moment of quietude. Hannibal speaks again, his voice a little raw, "There is no going back, Will. We must make beautiful what we have left."

Will stares out at the buildings, mostly doctor's offices with some surrounding trees, around them. Will's voice surprises him when he speaks. "Gio is beautiful," he says.

"Yes," Hannibal agrees. "She was."

On the drive back to Montaione, Hannibal turns on the radio for the first time since their meeting. Will finds this strange, but less so when Will realizes it's a police radio. They listen for a while, to robberies and calls for ambulances and the homeless 'disturbing the peace'. Finally, as they pull towards Will's school, they hear the call. *Cadavere*.

Will turns to Hannibal, who's already risking a look at him.

There's an unspoken current in the air. Will knows what they've both agreed upon before either of them speaks.

They're going to the crime scene.

Chapter End Notes

Cadavere: Dead body.

CHAPTER V

They arrive at the crime scene after the polizia and forensics team, with nothing but the pictures and an empty orchard. “The owner of the orchard found Ms. Doe mutilated and posed, some few days after her death,” Hannibal tells Will as they circle the impression left in the grass by the body and the tree it was attached to. Will looks down at the high resolution photos in his hands and sees Boticella’s Athena. It’s nearly an exact recreation— it’d have to be for Will, an art novice, to recognize it. But recognize it he does. It can’t be anything else. The unidentified female victim’s head is wreathed in olive branches, as well as her arms, waist, and breasts, and she’s draped in fabrics, sheer and deep, emerald green in color. In her left hand, bound by the same twine found at the scene of Gio’s death, is the decapitated head of a second victim. Also unidentified. Will looks at his face which, according to the preliminary forensic report, was morphed and glued into the pained expression Will finds. Every last detail, considered.

When Will looks up, it’s not Hannibal before him; it’s Gio.

She smiles. “I’m sorry to be seeing you under these circumstances,” she says softly. She looks back at the tree behind her, the one which the victim was sewn against using wire and twine. The body was posed flawlessly. Nothing without precision and consideration. *Immaculate design*, Will thinks. “It’s very beautiful, for a crime scene,” Gio says in her lilting accent.

“Death is never beautiful,” Will says under his breath, though he knows there’s very little point in disagreeing with a figment of his imagination, especially considering the thoughts bouncing around inside his brain. Will shakes his head. *Immaculate conception. Precision. Flawlessness*. Will must be unhinged.

She looks back at Will with a sly, nearly coy expression. “I meant the orchard, Will,” she says. “Not the body.” *What body?* Will thinks but then, there it is.

Posed exactly, with a relaxed expression, looking coolly at the decapitated head in hand, wreathed in olive branches. Will steps closer hesitantly, nearly level with Gio, examining the corpse without a modicum of fear. Suddenly, the body undoes itself— as in, the incision running the length of the torso heals, the body detaches from the tree, relaxes from its pose, the color returns to the skin of the corpse, the eyes become alert and fearful, the head falls to the ground. Will approaches. With Gio by his side, he steps closer and closer to the unidentified female until—

He guts her.

It takes one sure stroke of his scalpel down the length of her stomach to do it. Will watches and dissects, with an apathy, with a surgical precision, and her organs spill out from inside the cavity of her body, falling into a cooler at Will’s feet. It’s then, as she’s choking, gasping for air, clutching at her gaping wound, that Will slits her throat. She bleeds, and bleeds, and bleeds, spraying Will’s face with the warm wetness. Will watches, feeling an inkling of

curiosity and nothing more. Will lays his hands on the body then, now that it's just a body, sewing her into the tree. He breaks her foot to fit the pose, pierces her flesh to stick her in place, and on and on with the mutilation until she's… *perfect*. Then comes a rush of satisfaction, a lack of arousal, a simple pleasure at having made something beautiful. Something artful, out of nothing, out of offensive, putrid, stinking, human—

Will blinks the image away, suddenly back at the empty orchard with Hannibal, Gio gone; Will feels bile rising in his throat and vomits in the grass. When he stands to his full height once again, Hannibal is holding out a handkerchief, an offering. Will takes it and wipes the sweat from his forehead, from his throat, likely ruining what is probably a very expensive handkerchief. *Oh well,* Will thinks, *Hannibal will buy a new one*. Will leans against a nearby tree— not the one the body was posed against, and takes a few deep breaths. He doesn't bother with the *your-name-is-Will-Graham* business; he knows it'll only agitate him further. Instead, he wipes his palms on the handkerchief as well and then hands it back to Hannibal. Hannibal takes it, folds it, and returns it to its place in his pocket. Will stands against the tree for a long time. He doesn't want to move. He doesn't want to exist. *I killed her,* he thinks. *It was me*.

It wasn't, really, of course. Will knows that. But his mind's capability to recreate not just the actions of the killer but the *feelings*… Will could actually feel the rush of serotonin in his mind at completing the— at *killing the woman*. It wasn't just the spray of the blood against his cheek, it was the feeling of gratification at the sensation. Will killed her. He felt every second of it. Will doesn't know what he's going to do. He has nothing left and still, conditions manage to worsen. Will chuckles humorlessly. *I guess I always knew I was a freak,* Will thinks to himself. Will looks up at Hannibal, who's watching him with a strange, curious expression. "There's something seriously wrong with me," Will says softly. He realizes that, in that moment, all he wants is to go to Hannibal, to be in his arms, to be told his name, the location, the time, that everything will be alright. Will wants things to go back to how they were before so ferociously, so desperately, it nearly bowls him over.

Hannibal says, his voice almost something sweet, "There is nothing wrong with you." And Will really, really wants to believe him.

Hannibal checks Will's pulse and, finding his heart rate to be elevated still, offers his apartment as a neutral environment in which Will can calm down. Will, despite himself, accepts the invitation. He focuses on slowing his breathing over the course of the drive to Hannibal's apartment. Will's eidetic memory offers him the newspaper headline the day after Gio's body was discovered: *IL MOSTRO COLPISCE ANCORA.*

'The monster strikes again.'

The headline is stuck in Will's head like a song, all the way until they reach Hannibal's apartment building. When they arrive, Hannibal walks around the car to open the door for Will, as he has each time they've driven anywhere together since they met but Will, in his vulnerable state, feels the gesture like a stab in the gut.

Will follows Hannibal through the front door, through the foyer, up the stairs, and to the door that leads to Hannibal's apartment. Hannibal holds that door for him too and Will shuffles in feeling suddenly something akin to shyness. He wants to go home, but where would he go?

He goes inside.

Inside, everything is exactly as it was the last time Will was here, and Will's flooded by memories. He can't help but see the dining table at which he sat next to Hannibal, his right hand man for the night of the dinner party. Past the large dining room, in the living room, the bookshelf which Zihan cornered him against. As they walk through the apartment, to the study, the cushy armchair which Will curled up in one evening, dozing off, awakening to see Hannibal watching him with an expression which could only be described as *fond.* Their relationship has been a collection of tender moments and tragedies, and Will wonders if it could ever be anything more.

"May I check your pulse?" Hannibal asks Will as Will takes a seat on an armchair— a different one than the one he fell asleep in all those months ago, and Will nods silently. Hannibal crouches down to be eye-level with Will and Will holds out a wrist, but Hannibal reaches for the pulse point on his neck. Will stills. "Still fast," Hannibal mutters under his breath and Will only hears him because he's so close. The pads of Hannibal's fingers— their only point of contact, are slightly warm, calloused but still soft somehow, and everything Will wants. *Kiss me,* Will thinks, unbidden, quickly telling himself he didn't mean it. Hannibal is his benefactor, and nothing more. Will's gaze slides to the miniature bar set up in one corner of the room and Hannibal pulls his hand away.

Will crosses the room, and pours himself a drink.

Will is extraordinarily drunk.

This can only lead to catastrophe, but Will found he couldn't resist the pull of the glistening bottle of bourbon, and it's not like Hannibal was trying to stop him. Hannibal simply watched as Will poured himself drink after drink, beginning to stumble around the room and slur his words as the evening progressed. Now, Will lounges in a loveseat and watches Hannibal, who is pretending to read on the other side of the room, watching Will. It goes on like this for some time.

"Fuck me," Will says, finally, risking it.

Hannibal gives Will a lengthy, steady look, maintaining eye contact as though it was never a problem for them at all. Will, feeling emboldened, bites his lip. Hannibal was never his benefactor, or his friend, and it's time Will's honest with himself about the nature of their

relationship. Hannibal's eyebrows lift minutely, a microexpression cataloging a spectrum of emotion. Eventually, Hannibal says, "No."

As if it's so simple. Will tilts his head back, looks at the ceiling. *Is there any real consent between us?* Will wonders.

Will spends the night in the guest room, sleeping in his ratty clothes, out of school uniform for once, and when he wakes in the morning, Hannibal doesn't mention Will's proposition the night before, though Will's certain they're both thinking of it.

Hannibal's in the kitchen, frying bacon, humming ever so quietly.

Will stands in the doorway between the hall leading to the bedrooms and the kitchen for a moment, watching silently, nearly appreciating it. Will's reminded, then, of the disturbing dream he had of Hannibal, cutting up a human arm. *I really am a freak,* Will thinks to himself as Hannibal flips an egg. Hannibal's wearing an apron, which Will finds unfortunately adorable, and his hair's mussed from sleep. Will wants to run his fingers through it. He wants to go to Hannibal, be with him, make everything simple again.

When Will talks, he says exactly what he wants to say: "I'm sorry." Really, he says it in hopes Hannibal will tell him he did nothing wrong.
Hannibal doesn't startle, even a little bit. He turns the heat down on the bacon and shifts to face Will. "You are in grief," he says slowly. "It is only natural that you would act out of character during this time." Will considers telling Hannibal that last night was the most in character he's been in Hannibal's presence since November. He doesn't say that, though. He thinks he knows what Hannibal means. The version of Will which Hannibal knew before Gio's death was the brightest, kindest, most driven version of Will which has ever existed. At the height of his intelligence and maturity, before everything fell apart and Will was realized to the true nature of the world. Will can't blame Hannibal, for thinking of the version he knew as the 'in character' version of Will, but Will wishes he could express that his character has changed irrevocably. Will thinks back to something Hannibal said to him, during their very first meeting, on the subject of Will's age. *Seventeen*, he had said, *A transformative time. You have formed your chrysalis, and the world eagerly awaits what emerges.* Will tries to push the memory from his mind. He doesn't want to consider what he has become, truly.

Will approaches Hannibal. Hannibal turns his body so they are facing one another fully, and Will stands up on his tip-toes, grasps Hannibal's forearm with his left hand, and leans into him. "Hannibal," escapes Will's mouth like a whispered prayer and Hannibal leans down slightly, though his expression remains carefully blank. Will's nose brushes Hannibal's mouth gently, his eyelashes grazing Hannibal's cheek. They're close, so close.

Will kisses him.

It takes a moment for Hannibal to return the kiss. When he does, it's purposefully tender; placing a firm hand on Will's chest, nearly keeping him at bay. It's close-mouthed, almost chaste, but Will still pushes against Hannibal slightly, testing the boundaries. Hannibal holds

steady, kissing him sweetly, softly, just as good as Will remembers. Will thinks that it's always been Hannibal. *This* is the determined effect. The inevitable. The only possibility. The two of them.

CHAPTER VI

Hannibal and Will catch wind of a murder on the coast.

There's a period of peace. They don't spend much time together; they certainly don't kiss again, or even call. Will actually begins attending classes again and Hannibal gets caught up at the hospital. Will does better in school, wins some graces back with the administration, and assumes Hannibal does an equivalent at the hospital. Will doesn't feel the same passion for Biology. When Hannibal calls, it's through the school phone, not the sleek little cellphone. There is no Gio. Everything is different, but it's somehow approaching a reality Will thinks he could make a home in. Things almost return to a perversion of normal, if that's even possible.

But then, Hannibal calls Will with the next body, and Will's reminded of the fact that there is no 'normal' anymore. Will packs a bag, and Hannibal explains to the school that there's an opportunity for Will to attend a forensics conference in Livorno, and then they're off.

The drive is only an hour, but it feels like an age, as Will watches the changing countryside. They don't speak very much, as though they're relearning how to do this, or maybe learning for the first time something completely new. They don't listen to the radio either— police or otherwise. They just sit together in a silence that may be companionable, or may not. Will's never been good at telling about that kind of thing. He watches the world outside the passenger side window go by, and mulls over the limited information the polizia were able to give Hannibal over the phone. A girl Gio's age, brutally murdered. That's all they know. It's enough, though, for Will and Hannibal to go there, to investigate. Anything would be enough. Will's desperate. That's the only word for it. He doesn't think of the kiss; he *certainly* doesn't think of his request of Hannibal to 'fuck him'. *Jesus Christ,* Will does think. *I'm such a mess.*

They arrive first to the scene of the crime; a local cove which is a popular necking-location among the students of the nearby boarding school which the victim attended. It's a cold Winter day, and the waves are choppy and furious. Will looks out at them and hates himself for missing the warm, rich clothes Hannibal bought him. He supposes he's already crossed the line when it comes to reuniting with Hannibal, and there's no point in going without the gifts, but somehow it feels wrong to be dressed in Hannibal's finery, using the cellphone Hannibal bought him, at Hannibal's beck and call. Will and Hannibal walk the beach together and Will thinks, determinedly, *No.* He thinks, *It's Hannibal following me now.* Perhaps it's only fantasy to think that the power dynamic between them could ever be reversed, but perhaps it's the fantasy that's keeping Will alive.

The poliziotto explains to Will and Hannibal in Italian the details of the murder and the victim. A white girl, also blonde-haired and blue-eyed, stabbed to death, her body left naked and mutilated on the beach, tiny spider crabs picking at her corpse. Will's not looking forward to interviewing the poor kid that found her; his empathy is going to make it difficult to interface with someone that distraught. Perhaps Hannibal can handle that with his quiet, charming, sympathetic tone. Will bets some traumatized teenage girl will fawn all over that. *Just like I did,* Will thinks bitterly, then banishes the thought from his mind. He focuses on what the poliziotto is saying. Serrated blade, only nine inches in length; she was stabbed so violently the blade actually broke off inside her body, though the killer wasn't a total moron and managed to take the handle (and all its fingerprints) with him. *Stop editorializing,* Will scolds himself. This is an actual murder, not a fucking murder mystery novel. The poliziotto is telling Will that there were partial prints found on the actual body but weather conditions caused them to deteriorate beyond recognition, and nothing they *could* find is showing up anywhere anyways. Will tries to pay attention to this. He does not look at Hannibal, who is feigning interest in the poliziotto's words and attempting to covertly watch Will.

The poliziotto turns to Hannibal and asks if he's ready to travel to the school. Hannibal deflects politely, turns to Will, and repeats the question. Will resents the whole interaction, but feels they don't have the time for petty arguments. Will squints in the bright, overcast day, and nods in acquiescence.

Will half-listens as Hannibal discusses the student who was killed with various other people — mostly friends, acquaintances, a few teachers. He's so effortlessly charming, so easily encourages each person to reveal their intricate inner lives, it begins to impress Will, he begrudges. The corners of the boarding school, the halls and corridors, reminds Will of St. Gabriel, which he tries not to think about. As has been the case since her death, Will sees the absence of Gio everywhere. He shakes his head, and tunes into Hannibal asking questions of an Italian literature teacher in regards to the victim's personal relationships. Will finds the whole process to be a waste of time, ultimately, but if he's being honest with himself, he allows it to go on because he gleans a satisfaction at watching Hannibal work.

Still, eventually, it wears on him, and he feels compelled to put an end to things. It's the girl's football coach who does him in. Going on and on about how he didn't know the victim very well but 'heard' she was really something special, really sweet, bla bla bla. Will closes his eyes, exhales through his nose, and turns and walks away.

Hannibal follows.

"May I ask what is wrong?" Hannibal prompts Will, following him into a little alcove after muttering a quick and convincing apology to the football coach. Will turns to look at Hannibal, looking him in the eye, and tries to get a read on him. It's easier than it was four months ago, not so much like coming up against a brick wall, but still… there's something hiding behind Hannibal's eyes that Will just can't make out. It's as though Hannibal's wearing some kind of veil, shrouding something… that Will can't consider. Honestly, doesn't want to consider. Hannibal is, as he usually is, patiently awaiting Will's response.

“He killed her,” Will answers simply, trusting Hannibal to know he means the football coach, and the victim, respectively.

“He did,” Hannibal agrees.

Will turns slightly, eyeing the football coach. “He would’ve…” Will starts, then stops. He can’t bear to say it. The more he thinks about it, the more it starts to hurt. “If he could’ve. He’s impotent,” Will adds, though part of him is sure Hannibal already knows. The whole situation disgusts Will in a visceral way; he feels slightly sick to his stomach. “He hates women. He has since childhood. He blames his mother for it but really it’s just *him* ,” Will continues. “If you asked some of the other girls at school about him, they’d tell you the same thing.” Will really does feel sick now. “His touches linger. His gaze sticks to them. His comments skew inappropriate. He’s a predator and she… she challenged him.” Will feels a tear forming at the corner of his eye and his thought pattern shifts to *her* . “She was strong-willed. Kind-hearted. Too good.” *Like Gio,* Will thinks. *Just like Gio.* “This wasn’t *Il Mostro* ,” Will says, stating the obvious, what Hannibal— and Will, knew from the moment they saw the pictures of the body. From the moment they saw the beach, even. “This wasn’t artful, or poised, or—” *beautiful*, Will almost says, but stops himself. “This wasn’t him,” he says instead.

Hannibal nods. “What would you like to do next?” he asks.

Will looks back at the football coach, still so close. Will feels his rage at the injustice of it all bubbling up inside him, threatening to spill out. He engages, within his own mind, with the fantasy of marching over to the football coach and shoving him, accusing him, rightfully. Will would lay charges against him in front of everyone, would ruin him, would be *right* . But no, that wouldn’t be worth anything, in the end. Will knows what he has to do.

The poliziotto search the football coach’s apartment looking for the broken off handle of the knife. They find a lock of the victim’s hair. It only takes a single interrogation to break the coach, to bring him to his knees, to encourage him to confess. Will and Hannibal wait around long enough for charges to be pressed, but not any longer, staying in separate, equally tiny and dingy hotel rooms, not speaking very often over the course of the few days it takes to process the charges. Will wants to leave. It all— it all feels haunted.

On the drive back from the coast, they don’t discuss the murder. They don’t discuss the kiss between them either, though Will knows, somehow, that they’re both thinking of it. Without being asked, Hannibal’s drives the both of them to Florence, as though he knows that’s what Will wants. Will knows the moment they hit the highway which leads only to metropolitan Florence, and he feels it in his stomach: the nervous twists and turns of anxiety, of anticipation. He thinks he knows where this is going, and that feeling is sickly familiar.

Will thinks about the last dinner he had with Hannibal, before— everything. They had sat across from each other and watched one another over the top of wine glasses filled with water, always, always watching each other. This is nothing like that. Hannibal is not giving Will salacious looks; he only glanced at Will as he held the door for him. Will held Hannibal's gaze for as long as he was able, until Will was in the car and the door was closed. Will doesn't know how to feel about what he thinks is going to happen. What *should* he feel? Is there any right answer? He looks out the front window as they drive down the ugly highway. He shouldn't have kissed Hannibal, that much he knows. He should've kept the line drawn between them in the sand, not watched as it washed away. He shouldn't have called Hannibal at all. He should've done this on his own. But could he have? Did he have any other choice? He thinks what he thought before; determinism.

"Did you ever hear the worm in the blood story?" Will asks Hannibal quietly.

Hannibal remains quiet, though Will's sure he knows what Will's going to say, waiting for Will to continue.

So Will does: "Spinoza said that if there was a tiny worm in your blood," Will says, frowning at the slightly disgusting metaphor, which he cannot help but visualize, "that worm would think all the plasma and cells and platelets were separate things." The highway ahead of them is dismal to watch so Will leans a little against the passenger's side window, shifting his body to look at Hannibal instead. "But we know the blood's just one thing, really," Will says, watching Hannibal's unmoving expression. "It's all just… different attributes of one system."

There's a long pause. Finally, Hannibal opens his mouth and speaks, "Spinoza would tell us that we are not two people— and never were. Though perhaps pop-psychologists of the eighties would consider us 'codependent'." Hannibal says this like it's one of his on-the-nose jokes but Will doesn't find it funny at all. He finds it rings too true and yet, when he looks at Hannibal, he still wants him. Maybe it's his self-destructive nature, but he still wants Hannibal. He's beginning to fear he always will. *We are not two people,* Will thinks when he looks at Hannibal. *We never were.*

They arrive to Hannibal's apartment and, once inside, begin to kiss. It's Will who initiates it, leaning into Hannibal and bouncing up on his tip-toes to reach him, kissing him with restraint and affection. The kiss deepens as Will opens his mouth slightly, inviting Hannibal in, as he always does. Will's arms wind around Hannibal's neck and Hannibal holds Will at the waist and they sway together slightly, as though slow-dancing.

If Will's being honest with himself, truly, painfully honest, he wants to become one with Hannibal— just as he fears he already is. He wants to *marry* Hannibal. He wants Hannibal to lay him out on his deep red duvet and undress him, thrust against him, kiss his neck and shoulders, and *make love to him* , as ridiculous and kitschy and *sappy* as that sounds. Still, it's what Will wants. It almost hurts to admit and it certainly hurts worse to verbalize, though Will does: "I want you to take me to bed." Will says it just like that. A request and a demand, a plea and an offer, all at once.

Hannibal leads Will to the bedroom.

Hannibal lays Will out on the red duvet.

Hannibal undresses Will piece by piece, as though he's taking him apart.

Hannibal stretches Will out.

Hannibal slicks his own cock with lubricant.

Hannibal thrusts into Will slowly, pushing into him with a strained patience Will cannot comprehend.

Hannibal bottoms out. It feels like a little death.

Will cries out and Hannibal thrusts against him again and again, touching Will inside and out, pressed against him completely, encompassing him. It is strained but gratifying. Will wants to speak but remains at a total loss for words as Hannibal kisses his neck, his shoulders. Hannibal whispers something into Will's throat, in a language Will does not speak, quiet and earnest, tender. Will wants to understand what it means but can't, possibly, as Hannibal bites him. Will can't even think of it as Hannibal's teeth dig into his jugular, as Will shouts something beyond language, as Will arches against Hannibal's body, close, so impossibly close to him. Will's orgasm comes from a long way off; Will feels it long before it grips him completely. His toes curl and he clutches at Hannibal's shoulders, his nails scoring Hannibal's strong deltoids. Will comes untouched between Hannibal and Will's bodies, coating them both, slicking Hannibal's movement against Will. Hannibal thrusts into Will once more, twice more, the sensation almost painful now, and comes inside Will.

Will moans, loud and drawn out, at the feeling of Hannibal filling him up that way.

When Hannibal pulls out, Will can't help but feel cold and empty, despite himself. Hannibal kisses the length of his body, wipes him down with a cool, wet washcloth, and murmurs sweet nothings into his ear and still, Will feels that emptiness. That lack. Will had, for a moment, everything he wanted and still, that was not enough. Now, whatever he has, it feels like nothing. *We are not two people,* Will thinks as he falls asleep next to Hannibal. *I am not a person at all.*

CHAPTER VII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will returns to school and is called into the headmaster's office building once again.

"Signore Graham," the headmaster greets him as he opens the thick oak door leading from the waiting room to his actual office. Will spares him a suspicious glance before entering. The headmaster only ever seems to come to Will with bad news. Will is good at receiving bad news, but not so good at interfacing with those generating it in the first place. Will doesn't like bullies. Bottom line.

"What is it?" Will asks as he sits down in the uncomfortable chair on the disadvantaged side of the headmaster's desk, already at the end of his rope. He remembers with some indignity conversations over the phone with the school before the year began; the accommodation and opportunity promised to him, which he accepted with a spirit of wide-eyed belief. He wonders what shifted in the school's understanding of him as a person that has made them treat him this way, if perhaps meeting him in physicality was enough.

The headmaster takes his time sitting down, adjusting his tight-fitting blazer, shifting in his chair. Finally, he speaks. He asks, "How was your conference?"

Will blinks, looking at the headmaster blankly. "Fine," he answers. He doesn't want to invent gory details on behalf of Hannibal and his elaborate lie, but he will. He will do anything to protect his investigation into Gio's murder. "Learned a lot," Will adds. He will invent cadavers, incisions, and organs in buckets if need be, for this headmaster's inquiry. Will is past his natural inclination to tell the truth. It hurts to lie still, yes, but Will has endured so much hurt, it all feels like noise. *Hannibal would say I've evolved,* Will thinks bitterly.

"It takes a very special occasion to miss class," the headmaster says in that special tone people use when they are saying one thing but meaning something else.

Will never understands the second meaning. He says nothing.

"Your scholarship," the headmaster begins, and Will looks at him, not in his eyes but at the sheen of sweat above his brow, reflecting the light, "is contingent on *superb* attendance. Your teachers have made exceptions on your behalf due to 'excellent grades'," his fingers form quotation marks in the air. "I find such favoritism to embolden— or perhaps *cause* your patterns of malfeasance." Will notes the headmaster's butter-yellow teeth. "I will say it like this," the headmaster says. "Hannibal Lecter sees something special within you." Will blinks at the headmaster again, waiting for the point. *Hannibal certainly sees* something *in me,* Will thinks, remembering each of Hannibal's sweet, conniving, heart wrenching remarks about how *special* Will is, despite all the shit the world has given him, or perhaps because of it. "I do not," the headmaster finishes finally.

Will realizes he hates this man, and perhaps it's a sign of self preservation that he does. A year ago— six months ago, Will wouldn't have had the self respect to muster up any feeling towards the headmaster at all, no matter how frequently or severely the headmaster wronged him. And yet, now, Will feels a fire bubbling within him, an anger he thought he reserved for Gio's killer, at the sight of this large, balding man before him, who sits on his throne of shit and orders teachers to berate students and students to lie down and take it. Still, Will says nothing.

"You will serve detention after your classes today," the headmaster says.

Will has the good sense not to openly scowl, though it's a near thing. Will wants to enact his anger in some way, though it may get him into further trouble, and resisting is beginning to feel like lying. Though, as Will admitted to himself moments ago, he is evolving. He does resist. He even thanks the headmaster for meeting with him. "Thank you," he says through gritted teeth, "for taking the time to meet with me." And nothing more.

Will's detention consists first of writing lines, then wiping down whiteboards, and finally picking up litter. It's as though they couldn't decide which menial punitive task to assign him, and resolved to enforce all three upon him. The paragraphs he has to write consist only of the phrase, *I will not miss class*, transcribed over and over again, until Will feels like his brain is going to melt and begin running out of his ears. The wiping down of the whiteboards takes less time; Will only has to spray them with a cleaning spray and wipe them with a disgusting, grungy wet rag. It's the picking up of litter which weighs on him. Will's back aches from bending over, and his hands perspire within the thin, filmy plastic gloves they give him, and he shivers as a light drizzle begins to rain down on him. The affair is wholly miserable and all Will wants to do is return to his room, warm and soft and mostly unfurnished, and pour over old Il Mostro cases, looking for details. Looking for the things which only he can see.

Instead, by the time he does get back to his dorm, he's so exhausted he collapses onto the bed. Another want he finds within himself is this— the desire to call Hannibal. Maybe, and this is difficult for Will to admit, he always wants to call Hannibal, go to him with everything, like a dog bringing a dead bird to the door. That image brings Will a little sadness. A dog doesn't understand the death of the bird, except as a gift. And it's up in the air, whether the receiver of the bird will understand the gift, except as a dead bird. Will shakes the thought from his head. There's no use in mourning hypothetical birds. Will has enough on his plate. He manages not to call Hannibal this time, and instead drags himself out of bed.

The chapel is empty, thank God. *Small mercies*, Will thinks bitterly. He takes a seat at the front pew, avoids looking at the crucifix, and takes a deep breath in, closing his eyes. When he opens them, he expects to see Gio. Whether as a life-like apparition or rotting corpse, he does not know. He expects to see her blonde hair, her coldm blue eyes, her frozen-in-time smile. He opens his eyes. He sees nothing but the altar. Nothing but the crucifix.

Will doesn't go so far as to call her name, or cry, or act out anything so desperate, but he does wait a long time in the chapel. He sits in that front pew and says nothing as a fellow student filters in and, after a few moments of muttered prayer, filters back out. Will is struck by the ridiculous, and rather immature, feeling that if only he could live that student's life, if only for a day. If he could just *be someone else* , everything would be improved. But Will knows that's nonsense. *Everybody's got problems, son,* his father sometimes tells him. *Told me,* Will corrects in his own head. The pew becomes uncomfortable underneath Will, and he shifts slightly. Will will never live with his father again. No matter what happens. No matter if this kills him.

It won't kill me, Will thinks, frowning. He looks around at the empty chapel and realizes he's long past waiting for Gio to arrive. She's not coming. She's gone. *It won't kill me,* Will repeats to himself, becoming unsure what the 'it' refers to. Gio's death? The investigation? His affair with Hannibal? None of it's likely to kill him, not in the literal sense. But God, does it feel like it these days. Will stands and leaves the chapel, not looking back, though he wants to.

Will considers walking back behind the boys' dorm, to his little scraggly tree, but realizes he really is very tired. So he makes his walk back to his room short, and it's cold, and it *feels* long. Will mulls over his lovemaking with Hannibal as he goes, which only makes the walk feel longer. Will thinks of the strong muscles in Hannibal's arms and shoulders, which worked as he stretched Will out on his fingers. Will is grateful for the cold.

He arrives back to his room and, in a moment of what he would perhaps later identify as naïvité, he expects Gio to be on the other side of the door. She's not, of course.

Instead it is just his barren dorm. Will goes inside, shutting the door behind him. He toes off his shoes, undresses, puts on pajamas, brushes his teeth, and crawls into bed. As he tucks himself in, looking at the room lit by the pale moon, he realizes he is almost completely alone in the world. He has a lover who cannot love him. A father an ocean away. A dead best friend. Nothing more. Will is utterly, *utterly* alone.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the short update; life is a little hectic at the moment. I will be back at my usual pace sometime soon (hopefully!).

CHAPTER VIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wakes up, several days later, to news of another body, found the night before. Hannibal delivers the information with the appropriate amount of sympathy for the victim, though Will barely understands what that looks like, and anyways, it rings a little false to Will's ears. Hannibal's not sorry. Will knows this. Hannibal is a dark, hurt creature, who Will is only beginning to understand, or maybe doesn't understand at all. Hannibal does not pity these victims in the same way that he does not pity Will. That is all Will can think about as he dresses mechanically, brushes his teeth, does not bother shaving or combing his hair. (His five o-clock shadow has become quite impressive, not that he cares one way or another.) As he stands on the parking lot curb, waiting in the rain for Hannibal's sleek, black Benz, his thoughts shift to Hannibal's cool, consoling tone as he described the facts of the body, and how he responded when Will asked why he didn't call with the news sooner. "I didn't want to wake you," Hannibal had said, his tone unfaltering.

Hannibal pulls up the curb. It's a Saturday, which Will is grateful for. After the incident with the headmaster the week before, Hannibal is no longer working the case with Will during school hours, a boundary he made during one of his and Will's short, perfunctory phone calls, which they have shared infrequently over the course of investigating Il Mostro. Hannibal comes around from the other side of the vehicle and Will thinks, bitterly, *Don't* you *miss work for these little outings of ours?* But says nothing, as he's learning to hold his tongue. *Evolving,* Will thinks, tasting the word in his mouth. "Good morning," Hannibal says to Will as he holds the door open for him. *It's not,* Will bites down, then wonders when he started holding all these things back from Hannibal.

"Morning," Will replies instead, trying to mimic Hannibal's gentle diction. He's a little surprised when half of Hannibal's accent comes out, but then, he's not really. He's sure if he returned to the States suddenly, everyone would comment on his slight Italian accent. He's a mimicry of the world around him, and sometimes he feels as though he's nothing more.

Hannibal looks at Will with that elusive, slightly amused expression he so often wore when Will spoke to him freely. Will takes it to mean he's revealing something of himself in that moment, and he's not sure how to feel about that. Should he be hiding himself? Should he be baring himself? He doesn't know where any of the lines lay anymore, or if there are even any at all.

"He's on a spree," Will says as he sits back in the comfortable leather seat, allowing himself a single second of enjoying the Benz and, admittedly, enjoying Hannibal's company, refusing to think about his own comment. Even though everything's so tangled up now, Will still finds he immediately relaxes in Hannibal's presence, as though he's on edge all day until they meet again. *That can't be healthy,* Will thinks as he looks out the front window, as they pull out of the school. Hannibal does not respond to Will's comment. *Codependent,* Hannibal had said, jokingly. Will thinks that perhaps it wasn't a joke.

The body is wreathed in Ivy and Myrtle in the photos and Will closes his eyes, sees it in his mind. Seeing it in his mind is almost the same as seeing it in person, though perhaps not as clear, not as tangible. It's as though Will is looking at it from behind a thin film of plastic, or from very far away. Will, in his mind, makes an attempt to focus on the body a little better, as though it's the lens of a camera. Will sees it better. The body is that of a pale, heavy-set woman, serene expression, beautiful and naked, bared to the world but not— not *exposed* ; she was left in another chapel (there seems to be an endless supply at Il Mostro's disposal), out of the elements, though there are, of course, no prints or markings left behind. Her midriff is opened, exposing a lack of liver, the remaining organs and blood spilling out, coating her pelvis and thighs in blood and viscera. Will circles the body within his mind, seeing it from all angles, looking at the line down the center of her back and the dimples above her buttocks. He circles back to stand in front of her and sees how her hands are stretched before her, reaching out. Il Mostro skinned her hands, this time. Just her hands.

The hands, the most symbolic, most tender part of the limb; the part which *touches*. She is reaching, trying to touch. She is reaching out and unmasked in doing so; *raw*. Will notes, in addition to the skinned hands, the plants Il Mostro chose to envelop her in. Ivy. Myrtle. Fidelity. Union. Il Mostro has… hope. A muse. Will shudders to imagine who Il Mostro could possibly find, who he has deluded himself into thinking he loves. Will thinks, feeling alarmed, that Il Mostro is writing love letters in a language only he speaks. *Well,* Will corrects, *only he and I.*

"What do you see, Will?" Hannibal asks Will softly.

Will blinks his eyes open and they're back at the empty, cleaned out crime scene in Florence, Will is in his body and nowhere else. There is no corpse. Will looks up at Hannibal, who seems so beautiful to Will's new eyes. But it all comes rushing back to Will— the last six months of shit and hurt, and Will finds nothing beautiful at all. "It's devotional work," he says simply, perfunctorily. "Inspired. Romantic," Will thinks to add, wanting to get his point across without actually saying it. *Il Mostro thinks he's in love*, which is what Will means, of course.

As though reading his mind, Hannibal says, "He is in love."

Will shakes his head. "He's incapable of love." Will glances down at the photos in his hands. "He thinks of the world as his… prey. Prey or vermin." Will looks around them, at the vaulted ceiling and stained glass. "He finds architecture beautiful," Will says, seeing it through Il Mostro's eyes, just for a moment. "He finds art beautiful," *And worthy of recreation,* Will-who-is-Il-Mostro thinks. "He finds the bodies beautiful— but never the people." *Never the vermin.* "A wolf can't fall in love with one of the herd."

And Hannibal speaks Will-as-Il-Mostro's next thought before he has a chance to. "Perhaps the wolf may fall in love with another wolf," he says, standing beside Will at a careful distance, looking directly at him.

Will, as himself, thinks, *That's what I'm afraid of*.

It's at the coroner's office that they find the snake. At first, they think the body has a pulse. Then, they pull the snake from her throat. Will sees it for what it is: jealousy. Jealousy no longer meant to be swallowed.

Hannibal takes Will back to the apartment to discuss the case. Will expects himself to have more to say, but sits quietly near Hannibal in the sitting room as Hannibal draws. What, Will does not know, and doesn't ask. Hannibal sketches on a large piece of paper attached to a wooden board and Will sits near him in quietude. Finally, Hannibal looks up from his paper and asks Will, not about the snake, but the missing organs.

Will sits for another moment.

Missing organs. Liver, kidneys, heart, all missing from victim #1. Intestines missing from victim #2. Another liver missing from victim #3. What is Il Mostro doing with them? Why take something from a subject you see so lowly? And why take so many from the first victim? What was different about Gio? Will knows what was different about Gio. Everything was different; she knew her killer. She was the only one who knew him. Still, why take the organs with him? What's he doing with them? Will chews his lip and stares at the spines of the book on Hannibal's shelves. What is he *doing* with the organs? They're not trophies— he doesn't need trophies. He doesn't need to remember the thrill. For him, there is no thrill. The bodies are a means to an end— taking garbage, putrid, stinking trash and turning it into something beautiful. Into art. What do the organs turn into? There's only one answer. More art. "He's eating them," Will whispers softly, almost unaware he's speaking at all.

Hannibal nods his head. "And how do you know?" Hannibal asks like he himself already knows the answer.

Will shakes his head. "I don't know. I just know." And he does. He's sure. He wishes there was some evidence, and he could go to the police with it but no. They only take Hannibal seriously and, anyways, there's nothing to prove Il Mostro is a cannibal. "Il Mostro is a cannibal," Will says as it sets in on him.

"'*Cannibal*', coming from Columbus' word for Caribs, an Indigenous population which he invaded. He mistakenly called them 'Caniba', and believed them to be savages. American Indians, on the other hand," Hannibal says and Will has never, ever met a white guy who talks this much about Indians, "used every part of the animal, including organs, skin, bones, and teeth." Hannibal adjusts in his chair, sitting back slightly. "Perhaps this killer is so deranged, he sees himself as an altruist."

Will cringes. He doesn't want to think about Il Mostro feasting on the organs of his dead best friend. He doesn't want to think about what reality Il Mostro has deluded himself into, what wolf he has fallen in love with, *anything* to do with his cavernous, nauseating mind, which Will seems to be trapped within. Will takes a deep, shuddering breath in and realizes he's

shaking. *I don't want to be me anymore,* Will thinks, closing his eyes. He makes his hand into a fist to try and soothe himself. *I don't want to be me anymore,* Will thinks again and the thought is so visceral, so sad, it makes him want to cry. Will opens his eyes and Hannibal's kneeling on the ground in front of him, looking up at him with deep, kind eyes. He begins to stroke Will's shin in a hypnotic manner and Will, in an effort to calm down, focuses on the sensation above all else. It calms Will enough that he can speak, "I've been seeing—" Barely. Will chokes out the name, "*Gio*. Everywhere. And then nowhere. It's awful." He's crying now, nearly uncontrollably, and he wishes he wasn't. He doesn't want to cry in front of Hannibal. "I'm *insane*," Will says, between sobs.

Hannibal murmurs a hushed syllable, something soft and not English or Italian. "Everything is alright, Will," Hannibal says. "You are not insane. There is nothing wrong with you." His voice is so soothing, so sweet, Will chokes out another sob.

"Don't lie to me," he says harshly, wiping at his nose with his long sleeve.

Hannibal produces his handkerchief and Will takes it gratefully, though he's terribly embarrassed, a feeling Hannibal seems to bring out in him. "I am sorry," Hannibal says softly. Will wipes his eyes and nose with Hannibal's stupidly expensive handkerchief, probably ruining and staining it forever. "I did not mean… to hurt you." Will believes him, or — wants to. "I wish to…" Hannibal starts but stops himself. His voice is raw as umber, deep and dark and honest. Will wants to fall into it. "I want to make you feel better," he says finally, in a way that is simple and unpretentious, sincere. "How can I make you feel better?" Hannibal asks, an offering.

Will considers asking Hannibal to touch him, kiss him, make love to him again.

But he doesn't.

Will shakes his head. There's nothing Hannibal can do to make him feel better. It would be easier to let Hannibal lay him down and take him apart, piece by fucking piece. It would be easier, even, just to kiss him. Just to be in his arms. It would be enough, but then, Will's starting to realize… maybe he doesn't want that. Maybe it hurts more than anything else, to be close to Hannibal that way. To have Hannibal inside him is… Regardless of whether it's rough or gentle, quick or lengthy in the process, under the guise of platonic intimacy or romantic by nature, it all hurts Will. It's too much of a good thing, which Will is perhaps especially susceptible to. *Why can't I be normal about sex?* Will wonders as he cries with Hannibal at his feet, then remembers that he promised to stop wishing for normalcy. *Why can't I love a good thing?* Will thinks instead. *What can't it be enough for me— what I already have?* But it's not. It's never enough, and it all seems to leave him eventually anyways. So Will cries, not quite in Hannibal's arms, but close enough.

Chapter End Notes

On a more meta note-- Hannibal mentions Native Americans all the time because I happen to be Native and it's one of my areas of knowledge, lol. Hope y'all enjoyed this update! We're in the home stretch now!

CHAPTER IX

Chapter Notes

> Posting this mini-update as a sort of prelude to the final chapter-- which should be up within the next week. Hope y'all enjoy!

It takes everything in Will to ask Hannibal to drive him home that evening. He wants nothing more than to stay in Hannibal's cozy, elegant apartment, drinking tea and sitting in cushy armchairs, listening to Hannibal talk soothing nonsense. Instead, Will goes back to his barren dorm. He kicks the door shut behind him and toes off his shoes. He hangs up his ratty coat and undoes the top few buttons of his wrinkled shirt. He lets out a sigh, not quite meaning to. He's exhausted, and doesn't know why. He supposes he hasn't been sleeping lately, up late at night studying old case files or simply laying awake, staring at the ceiling. Will rolls his head, twisting his neck this way and that to try and ease some of the tension. His eye catches the corkboard.

It's scattered with photos of himself and Gio, himself and Gio's friends, school report cards which Gio insisted he hang up, and bits of friendship bracelets, tickets stubs, and a few postcards. It's so normal, so shockingly normal, it suddenly strikes Will as out of place in his room. This is a room which belongs to someone haunted by hallucinations and serial killers. This room has no place for pictures of a grinning Gio, her blonde head shining in a sun which no longer peeks out from behind the clouds. Will looks at the corkboard and sees it as a collection of memories from a life he has not lived in a month, a life which ended. Abruptly. Violently. Will feels as though he's mourning Gio, and the person he was before she died. The corkboard is a shrine to these two, and Will wants to burn it down.

He settles for tearing the pictures and pieces of paper and trinkets down from the corkboard and packing them into a shoe box and shoving the box under his bed. Will considers taking the corkboard itself down in addition, but doesn't.

Instead, he begins pulling pieces from the case files— old and new, picking out the principal details and beginning to pin them to the board. He takes out a highlighter and sharpie from his messenger bag and begins to highlight key details and circle images most relevant to the case, then uses pushpins to attach them to the corkboard. He labels the different groups which he's pinned up with the sharpie and scrap pieces of paper and wishes desperately he had some twine to tie everything together but then, twine is ruined for him, he guesses. One more thing to thank Il Mostro for. He adjusts the pages and photos and takes a step back to look at his work.

Art enthusiast. Posing. Surgical precision. Organs missing (and eaten).

What does it mean?

Will mulls it over. Doctors with a passion for the Renaissance era. Art-grads with medical training. Morticians? Surgeons? Museum curators? And, of course, cannibals. A *cannibal.* Will knows the primary motivations behind cannibalism are necessity, ritual, and sexual release. Il Mostro is not starving, or religious, or sexually motivated. So what does that leave Will?

It leaves Will a series of questions with no answers. It leaves Will on the precipice of some kind of realization. He knows the realization will be earth-shattering, life-ruining, something awful. Will knows he's not ready for it, whatever it is, and yet he seeks it out desperately, with a fervor. He wants to know— *needs* to know, who Il Mostro is. In a way, he supposes, he already does. He knows so much about him and yet, if Il Mostro passed him in the street, Will wouldn't recognize him. Will probably wouldn't look twice at him; reasonably handsome, affluent, European and white, a perfectly normal man. Will wouldn't even hold his eye. He doesn't know what to do with that, the knowledge that he has to catch Il Mostro, but may not. He supposes he's been avoiding thinking about the possibility. He's convinced himself that he *will* catch Il Mostro, because if he doesn't… he won't have anything left. He'll be left with nothing.

Will falls asleep looking at the board. He's not sure if it comforts or unnerves him, but he stares at it all the same, until his eyelids are heavy with sleep and he drifts off.

Will is standing in the creek from his childhood. The water is an impossible blue and silver-scaled fish flash and flicker through the stream, catching the sun. The air is clear and fresh and Will takes a deep breath in, enjoying it. Around him is thick, green foliage, all-encompassing, surrounding him. The birds chirp and dip and swallow in the air, and if Will were closer to the trees, he's sure he'd be able to make out all sorts of woodland creatures. In the distance are hills coated in a layer of forest, which never existed in Louisiana, and certainly not New York City, though it all has a familiar feeling.

Will looks down and sees his high waders, the sturdy, name-brand fishing rod in his hands. The water weaves around and laps at his knees and the riverbed-stones are firm underneath his feet, though they should be slippery. Will feels more at home than he did in New York, or even Louisiana. Will feels at home.

He looks back up and squints at the bright sun, wishes he had a hat. He remembers the old beat up Nicks hat he left in New York, likely under his bed or maybe on top of the dresser. He wishes for it now, and laments its loss.

Still thinking of the hat, he looks back down and sees something rising from the river.

At first, he thinks it's a bloated salmon; perhaps it's mating season. But then, the shape and color of it is all wrong. It's bulbous and pitch black and it continues rising, rising, until it emerges, a head. A grotesque, non-human head surfaces, bearing antlers the size of a large

stag's, completely black in color, crystalline droplets dribbling from the antlers, rivulets of water running down the face of the creature. The creature has a face and black eyes. The face is familiar but previously unseen, like the surrounding creek, which has started to melt away. The stag-man-creature is now completely materialized, standing at its full height, seeming to tower above Will. Its body is skeletal and black in color and Will feels afraid. He feels fear like an icicle through his throat, needling the inside of him, cold. Will wants to turn, to run, but his body is frozen, his feet stuck to the riverbed which is no longer a riverbed, just nothing, nothing at all. Will is frozen in the absence, as the creature approaches him.

It moves closer. Closer.

It moves past Will, just barely avoiding brushing his arm and Will doesn't know what he would do if the creature touched him. Will is able to twist his body slightly, and his head, though it's like moving through molasses and his feet remain planted. Will shifts awkwardly to follow the creature as it moves away from him. As he turns, he sees a truly familiar blonde head of hair. *Gio!* Will tries to shout, but can't. Remains silent. His mouth moving around the noiseless syllables, choking out the sounds, unable to make any meaningful sounds. The creature approaches Gio and Will feels terror grip him. *Gio!* he tries again, but it's no use. He can only watch, in abject horror, as the creature bends its head down and takes a running start at Gio, gaining speed, goring her. Goring her.

The river returns, this time flowing with Gio's blood. The creature is gone. Will remains.

He wakes up drenched in sweat and panting.

He does not go back to sleep.

Instead, he calls Hannibal.

CHAPTER X

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will towels off and changes into a fresh t-shirt and throws on some sweatpants. He omits a jacket and waits, shivering, in the cold night for Hannibal to pick him up. He doesn't remember watching the Benz pull up around the corner as he usually does but somehow it's in front of him. Then, suddenly, he's sitting in the passenger seat, leaning forward and watching Hannibal in the rearview mirror as he walks around the back of the car to get to the driver's side. *What's happening to me*? Will wonders deliriously.

Will is aware of bits and pieces of the drive, recognizing this turn and that sign, but is certainly not lucid. Will feels as though he's still half-asleep, as though he's fading in and out of a dream. Though his eyes are open, it seems as though the streetlights are blurred, like they're reaching for something. *Maybe I'm developing astigmatism,* Will thinks, as if he needs any more issues. Eventually, though, they get to Florence, and to Hannibal's apartment.

Hannibal helps Will out of the car, holding him with one hand on Will's elbow and one hand on the small of his back, as though he's about to faint. Will can't bring himself to resent this, and in fact feels grateful for it. Will feels out of character, out of body, out of it.

He stumbles on the way to the apartment, and Hannibal catches him.

Once they're inside, Will feels like he can breathe again. He feels that sweet, familiar sense of relief wash over him like cool water and he breathes in, and out. "Very good, Will," Hannibal is murmuring to him, and Will is flooded by the memory of a time before everything went to shit, when all he wanted was for Hannibal to call him a '*good boy*'. Everything felt so complicated then and Will wishes he could go back in time and tell himself from a month ago that it doesn't actually matter, what kind of *sex* he and Hannibal are having, that none of it matters. But Will supposes he learned everything at the moment he needed to. These thoughts swirl and morph in Will's mind as Hannibal leads him through the house and to the guest bedroom, opening the door for him, bringing him to the bed, which is already turned down and ready for Will. Hannibal lays Will out like he has so many times before but instead of joining him, simply tucks him in the way you would a child, and leans down, kisses Will's forehead.

The gesture is so intimate, so pleasant, it calms Will, assuages the fear he had about falling asleep again. He closes his eyes and takes another deep breath in. When he lets it out, opens his eyes, Hannibal is still there, having made himself comfortable in the armchair in the corner of the room. Will watches him as he picks out a book to read and begins reading it at a pace which Will knows is slower than he generally prefers, but he *is* reading, not just

watching Will. Will *is* watching him, though. Will watches him, and does not remember falling asleep.

When Will wakes up, Hannibal is gone.

Will sits up slowly, taking in the room around him. He's never slept in the guest bedroom before, and does not recognize it immediately upon waking. But it comes back to him: where he is, *who* he is. He is Will Graham, and he slept a blank, dreamless sleep in Hannibal's guest bedroom. And he's alone now. He wipes at his eyes with the back of his wrist and blinks, his eyes adjusting to the dark. He can see almost nothing, thanks to the black out curtains on the windows, but knows Hannibal isn't in the room. There's no murky shape of him in the corner, no sound of his steady breathing. Will finds he misses it.

He resolves to go to Hannibal's bed.

He rationalizes that Hannibal won't mind, has shared a bed with him many times before, clearly cares for him, clearly wants to give him what he wants. And Will wants this. He wants to go to Hannibal, be with him, be held in his arms. *Maybe it's not always wrong to do what's easiest,* Will thinks, crawling out from under the heavy covers. He creeps out of the room, opens the door slowly, wanting to be quiet, feeling as though he's sneaking around for some reason. He's not, really. He has nothing to hide— not from Hannibal. Not anymore. He supposes it's time to give up on being guarded around Hannibal, as pseudo-safe as it made him feel for a moment, because what is the point? He and Hannibal are… *entangled*. Highly visible, only to each other. Speaking a secret language only they understand. Will stops in his tracks. Hannibal left a curtain open in the study, and the slice of pale white light pours out from underneath the door, drawing Will in.

It's not just the light which pulls him, it's something else. Instinct, maybe. Animal-instinct. He pushes the door open to the study and sees it exactly as it always is: neat, tidy, stylishly decorated though decidedly not modern. The shelves are lined with books and there are cushy jewel-toned armchairs and a loveseat pressed against the walls. Will notes one, minute difference: a bound black book, solid in color, with no text on the cover or spine, laying on the tiny table next to the loveseat.

Will approaches.

The moonlight from the window seems to fall on the book in an unnatural manner, painting it in a peculiar blue hue. Will reaches out a hand to touch it, then hesitates. Does this constitute going through Hannibal's things? Invading his privacy? *No,* Will thinks. It's a book, not a diary. There's no harm in opening a book which Hannibal left out in the study. It's fine to look into it; nothing bad is going to happen. Will tells himself this as he opens the book.

Inside, on the first page, is a detailed drawing which Will recognizes right away. It's a penciled recreation of Il Mostro's first murder. A wave of numbness washes over him, as though flowing through his very veins, and Will's hand moves without his permission, flipping to the second page. On it is what Will expects with a removed and rational

disposition: Il Mostro's second murder. Will continues to flip through the pages, finding body upon body, each recreated with a careful, loving hand, each so perfectly detailed, the shades and expressions immaculately expressed— Will can *see* the care on the page, the heartfelt tenderness. *This* is the design, this is Il Mostro's design. This is *it.*

Will realizes his hand is shaking. Internally, he still feels calm. He knows what this means. It can only mean one thing. But still, Will feels cool and collected, closes the book softly, closes the curtain, shutting out the strange light. He knows what this means. Still, he turns and walks slowly out of the room, shutting the door behind him. He knows what this means. Still, he walks down the hall. Still, he stops in front of Hannibal's door.

He opens it without knocking.

Inside the room, Hannibal is asleep in bed, the covers slightly tangled around him, his face cut by the dim light pouring in through the hallway, beautiful as ever, as though it's drawing Will in, tempting him to forget it, forget all of it, just go to bed. And Will almost does. He almost goes to bed, almost crawls under the covers with Hannibal, almost lets himself. God, he wants to. He feels in his gut that it is *all* he wants and he feels it is all he could have— this could be his future, if only he would… *go to bed. Go to bed,* he wills himself. But he doesn't.

He stands in the doorway like a spector until Hannibal blinks his eyes open slowly, a sleepy, inviting expression on his face. Will takes a step forward and Hannibal smiles softly, opens his mouth to speak. "Are you alright, Will?" he asks gently, his voice something tender. Will's heart makes an uncomfortable twist within its cavity, the first feeling he has, breaking through the numbness, through the inclination to stay.

"I don't feel well," Will lies as though it's easy, though his tone remains robotic and mechanical. "Can you take me home?"

Home. He says that word and means, *Anywhere but here.*

Hannibal nods his head, shifts out from under the covers and Will sees him in silky looking pajama bottoms and a lack of shirt, his body all angles and planes; musculature. Will finds he still wants to go to him, reach out, touch him. But then he thinks of the latest victim, her skinless hands, reaching out, forever reaching. *He probably wants to kill me,* Will thinks, knowing it to be true but not feeling the emotional effects— feeling still numb, in his head, in his arms and legs, like he might fall over. *He wants to kill me*, Will thinks as Hannibal stands to his full height, approaching Will and towering over him. Hannibal reaches out and touches Will, gently, at the elbow. Hannibal leans down and presses a soft, dry kiss against Will's cheek and Will allows it, feeling nothing. Nothing.

Will gets out of the car at the open gates of St. Gabriel, and does not look back, knowing if he looks at Hannibal, he will not look away.

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned for Act III<3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!